

The Lessons of Rabbi Eliach

Yeshivah of Flatbush celebrates innovative educator's 90 years.

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Rabbi David Eliach: Moved Jewish education beyond the classroom.

MICHAEL DATIKASH

To a Hebrew poet, as Rabbi David Eliach is and always was, words — Hebrew words — not only matter, but pulsate with holiness, illuminating the essence of Zionism, Judaism, peoplehood. A seventh-generation Yerushalmi (Jerusalemite), with chasidic rebbes in both branches of his family, he turns 90 in September, “on Yud-Chet Elul,” he says proudly, knowing that he shares not only a famous birthday with the Baal Shem Tov and the first Lubavitcher rebbe, but their sensibility that the Alef-Bet is not just an alphabet but a potion.

One is drawn not only to his 90th birthday but to his actual birth day, in Jerusalem 1922, when Eliezer Ben-Yehuda was still alive; Ben-Yehuda, the man who almost singlehandedly invented Modern Hebrew. Imagine, the old Ben-Yehuda and the infant Eliach briefly sharing the air of the Holy City; that’s how young Modern Hebrew is; that’s how old Rabbi Eliach is, the young Yerushalmi living on within the elder.

New Yorkers know Rabbi Eliach best as the longtime principal of the Yeshivah of Flatbush, the iconic maroon-and-gold centerpiece of Brooklyn’s Modern Orthodox life and culture, a school that has produced dozens and dozens of bold-faced names in Jewish intellectual life and public service.

Many of them, and other former students, colleagues and friends, will be present when the school honors Rabbi Eliach on his special birthday next Wednesday evening, Sept. 5.

Rabbi Ronald J. Levy, principal of the Yeshivah of Flatbush, says Rabbi Eliach, who retired 15 years ago, “still comes in two or three times a week, mentoring teachers — not just young teachers but spending time with the administration — to see how we can make things better and maintain our standard of excellence. He’s the ultimate representative of the ideal educator. His strength has always been that he never rests on his laurels, always self-analyzing in order to continue moving forward.”

“I remember a meeting with a teacher,” says Rabbi Eliach, “and I said ‘We’re not good in this, and not good in that, and the teacher said, ‘But everybody says Flatbush is the best school.’ I said, ‘Yes, precisely because we don’t think we’re good enough, because we’re not satisfied. Great institutions can die if they don’t adjust themselves to a new

era, if you think you're so good that you don't have to change. I always knew I wasn't good enough, that I always had to change and adapt. You can always learn. I say, 'al tagid ee-efshar, elah eich-efshar,' don't say you can't do it but how to do it."

When, for example, he sensed during the social upheavals of the 1960s that "the yeshiva movement was stagnant," as he felt it occasionally became, he moved Jewish education beyond the classroom, introducing chesed (community service) projects as a requirement for graduation; introducing the now-normative Shabbaton weekend retreats and the now-normative post-high school "gap" year in Israel (which actually started as a senior year second-semester in Israel before expanding into the full post-graduate year in the early 1970s).

He also took his students into the streets on behalf of Soviet Jewry, at a time when most other schools, and particularly the Jewish establishment, still were demeaning Jewish street demonstrations as both crude and counterproductive. "You have to realize," says Rabbi Eliach, that back in Jerusalem, "I used to make demonstrations against the British. And so when I told the kids to go somewhere for Soviet Jewry or for Israel, I went with them, in cold and snow. That was my way, to be there with them."

He titled his Hebrew memoir, "Avar Shelo Avar: Zichronot Shel Yerushalmi," the past that is not past. He's lived through nearly a century of turbulent Jewish history, from the Arab pogroms of 1929 through the Holocaust, the revolt against the British, and this son of the Haganah fears for the future of an uneducated, unprepared people.

"Look what's happening now with the anti-Semitism in the world; it's going to hit America, too. I don't think Jewish kids are ready for that. We have to teach them why the Jewish people, Judaism and Zionism are important. The more you are educated, the more you know who you are, and the more you can fight to defend what needs defending."

Rabbi Eliach recalls, "Some teachers said, why are we wasting our time outside the classroom when we could be teaching, but I insisted that teaching had to be more than that."

If he was often among the first in so many areas of Jewish education, he is also among the last to be a Hebrew exclusivist, similar to Ben-Yehuda, insisting on the Ivrit B'Ivrit teaching method, in which all Judaic classes are conducted in Hebrew, with even biblical Hebrew and Tamudic Aramaic translated not into English but Modern Hebrew.

Once widely admired, it is now a system honored mostly in the breach. "A shame," he says. "This wasn't just dikduk [rules of grammar] but poetry and philosophy: Ahad Ha'am, Agnon; I see students who graduated 20 years ago, and I can speak to them in Hebrew, of Bialik or Tchernikhovsky, even though they are so many years out of school."

The rabbi and author Joseph Telushkin, who graduated from Flatbush and knew Rabbi Eliach from Camp Massad, a Hebrew-speaking camp in the Poconos, recalls the rabbi speaking in "a very clear, beautiful Hebrew that was so expressive."

In Rabbi Telushkin's "Biblical Literacy," he credits Rabbi Eliach ("just a wonderful person") for developing "my ability to study the Bible and other Jewish texts in the original." Rabbi Eliach "has a masterful ability to illuminate with fresh insights the biblical texts that I and others might have read a dozen times."

Leon Wieseltier, The New Republic's literary editor and a Flatbush graduate [full disclosure: he is the brother of Thea Wieseltier, The Jewish Week's director of strategic projects and also a Flatbush grad], e-mails, "Rabbi Eliach is the most enlightened Jewish believer I have ever known. He taught me tolerance, and spiritual curiosity, and exegetical imagination, and the love of the Hebrew language; and his example of religious reason has had a lasting influence upon my own path. If ever I have had a rabbi, as the tradition instructs one to have a rabbi, it has been him.

If there were more teachers and thinkers like him, the Orthodox world, the Jewish world, would be a more decent and more competent and more stimulating place. I stand gratefully on his shoulders.”

In his Upper East Side apartment, Rabbi Eliach offers a guest a plate of fruit. “When my mother would offer a guest food, she’d say, “Here, make a bracha [blessing].” More than 80 years later, he gently says the same.

Ordained at the Hevron Yeshiva in 1943, “I was with Bnei Akiva when we heard a group was coming, Yaldei Tehran [the children from Tehran], they were called,” actually some 800 Jewish children from Poland who were transported through Tehran to the Yishuv, the pre-State Jewish community. “They had no parents, no family. I volunteered to help.” Before rabbinical school he had been in a teacher’s college, “and it was there, with Yaldei Tehran, I decided that what I really wanted to do: teach.”

While teaching in Kfar Batya, another youth village, he fell in love with Yaffa, one of the older students and a Lithuanian refugee. Yaffa Eliach, of course, would go on to become famous in her own right, a pivotal Holocaust scholar, innovating the use of survivor testimony. Now ailing, “she was a brilliant student, brilliant,” her husband remembers. “We spoke about Tanach,” the Hebrew Bible, he says, and then he starts to laugh. “We were a different generation,” he says.

In 1953, Joel Braverman, founder of the Yeshiva of Flatbush, was in Israel, saw Rabbi Eliach teaching a class, and recruited him for Flatbush, if only for a year or two, which turned into almost 60. It’s only fitting that he’ll be celebrating his 90th birthday at the yeshiva next week.

A new year, a new school year, begins.

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